

THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF  
BRITISH COLUMBIA

# SELECT STANDING COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE AND FISHERIES

## FIRST REPORT



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THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF  
BRITISH COLUMBIA

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# **Select Standing Committee on Agriculture and Fisheries**

**First Report**



**May 2000**

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May 16, 2000

To the Honourable  
The Legislative Assembly of  
The Province of British Columbia  
Victoria, British Columbia

Honourable Members:

We have the honour to present the First Report of the Select Standing Committee on Agriculture and Fisheries for the Fourth Session of the Thirty-Sixth Parliament.

This first report, which represents a selection of the views expressed to the Committee during its public consultation process, is intended to demonstrate the volume and extent of issues raised by witnesses to the Committee.

The Committee continues to examine the evidence it has gathered, and to develop a vision and set of recommendations for a comprehensive agri-food policy that will serve British Columbians now and into the future.

Respectfully submitted on behalf of the Committee.

Mr. Bill Goodacre, MLA  
Chair

Mr. Bill Barisoff, MLA  
Deputy Chair



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## COMPOSITION OF THE COMMITTEE

### MEMBERS

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Bill Goodacre, MLA	Chair	<i>Bulkley Valley-Strikine</i>
Bill Barisoff, MLA	Deputy Chair	<i>Okanagan-Boundary</i>
Hon. Bill Hartley, MLA (Chair and Member to March 15, 2000)		<i>Maple Ridge-Pitt Meadows</i>
Ed Conroy, MLA		<i>Rossland-Trail</i>
Evelyn Gillespie, MLA		<i>Comox Valley</i>
Richard Neufeld, MLA		<i>Peace River North</i>
Glenn Robertson, MLA		<i>North Island</i>
Hon. Joan Sawicki, MLA (Member to March 15, 2000)		<i>Burnaby-Willingdon</i>
Dennis Streifel, MLA		<i>Mission-Kent</i>
John van Dongen, MLA		<i>Abbotsford</i>
John Wilson, MLA		<i>Cariboo North</i>
David Zirnhelt, MLA		<i>Cariboo South</i>

### CLERKS TO THE COMMITTEE

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Craig James, *Clerk of Committees and Clerk Assistant*  
Peter Hucal, *Committee Clerk (to July 1999)*  
Kate Ryan-Lloyd, *Committee Clerk*

### COMMITTEE RESEARCHERS

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Wynne MacAlpine  
Josie Schofield

### CONSULTANT TO THE COMMITTEE

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Paul Guiton





## TERMS OF REFERENCE

For the purpose of this inquiry, the Committee was established on July 23, 1998, during the Third Session of the Thirty-Sixth Parliament and given the following terms of reference:

*That the Select Standing Committee on Agriculture and Fisheries be appointed to examine, inquire into and make recommendations with respect to an "Agri-food" Policy for the new Millennium and beyond for British Columbia and in particular, without limiting the generality of the foregoing, to consider:*

- 1. the deliberations of the Ministry of Agriculture and Food agri-food policy consultations and*
- 2. any other matters referred to the Committee by the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries.*

*In addition to the powers previously conferred upon the Select Standing Committee on Agriculture and Fisheries the Committee be empowered:*

- (a) to appoint of their number, one or more subcommittees and to refer to such subcommittees any of the matters referred to the Committee;*
- (b) to sit during a period in which the House is adjourned, during the recess after prorogation until the next following Session and during any sitting of the House;*
- (c) to adjourn from place to place as may be convenient; and*
- (d) to retain personnel as required to assist the Committee,*

*and shall report to the House as soon as possible, or following any adjournment, or at the next following Session, as the case may be; to deposit the original of its reports with the Clerk of the Legislative Assembly during a period of adjournment and upon resumption of the sittings of the House, the Chair shall present all reports to the Legislative Assembly.*

The Committee was restructured in the Fourth Session of the Thirty-Sixth Parliament, and reappointed with the same terms of reference.



## COMMITTEE PROCESS

The Select Standing Committee on Agriculture and Fisheries was appointed on July 23, 1998, during the 3<sup>rd</sup> session of the 36<sup>th</sup> Parliament. Its work continued the process of developing a new agri-food policy that the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food started in the mid-nineties.

In 1998, anticipating that the free trade agreement and federal cutbacks in farm safety nets would have a significant impact on B.C. agriculture, the ministry organized a series of consultations with a variety of industry stakeholders. The ministry's consultations culminated in a discussion paper, *Choosing Our Future: Options for the Agri-Food Industry*, which was referred to the Committee for review.

The Committee was also asked to undertake the crucial final part of the agri-food policy process. This involved gathering ideas and opinions from consumers, producers, processors, retailers and distributors from around the province. Its work involved four separate types of consultation.

Between November 1998 and July 1999, Committee members were briefed by ministry staff and selected commodity and producer groups on the state of B.C. agriculture. Another series of briefings took place in February 2000 with senior government officials. In total, the Committee heard 33 presentations in 11 briefing sessions.

The Committee also commissioned a consultant, Paul Guiton, to conduct four focus groups with over 30 B.C. consumers to hear their views on food-related issues. The focus groups took place in the interior at Kelowna and Williams Lake and in the cities of Vancouver and Victoria.

The Committee engaged in an extensive public consultation process during the fall of 1999. On September 24, 1999, it published a schedule of public hearings and a request for written submissions in the province's major newspapers. Between October 12 and December 2, 1999, the Committee held 16 public hearings in the following communities: Fort St. John, Smithers, Prince George, Williams Lake, Kamloops, Vernon, Oliver, Creston, Courtenay, Victoria, Abbotsford, Pitt Meadows, Delta and Vancouver. In total, the Committee heard 318 oral submissions and received 422 written submissions during the public consultation process.

Finally, in order to learn about agri-food policy developments in other jurisdictions, the Committee met with a delegation of 28 Cuban farmers and agrologists on September 10, 1998, and After the public consultation process ended, visited three jurisdictions outside B.C. In February 2000 they traveled

to Alberta, Washington and Oregon to exchange ideas and share information with senior government officials in their agricultural agencies.

This first report of the Committee encapsulates a selection of the broader orientations and themes that were discovered through the Committee's consultations. Witnesses to the Committee spoke to a host of subjects, including land and resource use, value-added opportunities, market development, and the social or community significance of agriculture. The report is intended to give some indication of the volume and scope of the evidence currently under consideration, and to note that the Committee is progressing in its work.

The Committee would like to take this opportunity to thank the hundreds of farmers, producers, officials and consumers who have participated in its consultations. The Committee appreciates the effort and time put into each submission and will continue to give all proposals careful consideration.

## **BACKGROUND ON BRITISH COLUMBIA AGRICULTURE AND FOOD INDUSTRY**

The provincial agri-food sector is a growth industry in B.C. that creates over 200,000 indirect jobs for people who produce, process, package, transport, distribute, sell, prepare and serve food products. Every year British Columbia's 22,000 farms produce over 200 commodities with a farm-gate value of more than \$1.6 billion. This volume and range of production takes place in diverse geographic and climatic regions, and on a small base of arable land.

B.C.'s farms and commercial fisheries together produce more than 60 percent of the province's total food requirements.

British Columbia ranks sixth among the Canadian provinces in farm cash receipts. Commodities producing the largest revenues include dairy, floriculture and nursery, poultry, beef, berries, grapes and treefruit.

Foods grown and processed in B.C. rank among the best quality, the freshest and the safest foods in the world.

In 1998, Canadian consumers spent just 10 percent of their disposable income on food, but farmers receive only a small amount of the price shoppers pay.

More than half of the province's 19,000-plus farmers have gross annual farm sales of less than \$10,000.



## VISIONS OF AN AGRI-FOOD POLICY FOR B.C.

A large number of witnesses shared the kind of comprehensive vision for B.C. agriculture that was articulated by the B.C. Agriculture Council. The council's vision for agri-food policy is based on three fundamental principles: the security of the food supply within B.C.; food safety; and the sustainability of agriculture economically, environmentally and socially. The council believes this vision must also include a government commitment to the maintenance, growth and development of the agriculture industry, while maintaining policies for agricultural land preservation.

*If we have a final wish, it would be that when you face a tough choice, you err on the side of farmers.*

Vern Toews, Pitt Meadows

The Council suggests that to achieve the above agricultural vision, government must subscribe to the following objectives:

1. *Industry success will be achieved through market strategies that establish strong customer relationships built upon a diversity of high-quality products.*
2. *Strong alliances among all the components of the industry producers, processors and distributors are essential to generating efficiencies and responding to market opportunities.*
3. *For long-term success in the global marketplace, the agri-food industry must find ways to remain profitable and competitive. But our competitive position cannot be based on cost alone.*
4. *Strong support for regulated marketing, including supply management, will continue. Policy changes will be made to ensure that these systems continue to evolve with global trends.*
5. *Independently owned family farms and agri-food businesses are a reliable means of achieving job creation, rural development, and strong communities.*
6. *Protection and full utilization of our scarce agricultural lands are critical to enhancing the competitiveness of the industry, promoting rural development, and providing a safe and reliable food supply for our population.*
7. *Ensuring the ready availability of other inputs, particularly water, is necessary for agri-food production and processing.*
8. *Sustainable agricultural practices will be developed in partnership with industry. These practices must be consistent with the environmental and ecological objectives of the province and recognize the need for an economically viable industry.*



9. *Agriculture makes significant contributions to environmental sustainability, but it cannot be expected to carry the full burden of providing this public good at the expense of its economic viability.*
10. *A skilled and competent workforce is essential to the development of our agri-food sector.*
11. *A greater awareness of consumer preferences, improved information on food production systems, and stronger societal/agri-food relationships and planning are essential at both the local and provincial levels.*
12. *Government has a critical role to play in assisting with unpredictable natural hazards and market risks; food health and safety; and creation of a positive business climate for industry investment; but not in guaranteeing the economic success of all individual businesses.*
13. *Provincial participation in trade and other intergovernmental forums is essential to protect the agri-food industry against unfair international, national, and interprovincial practices that impact on trade and competitiveness.*
14. *Strong industry organizations are needed to provide leadership in industry development and a voice in public discourse.*

Another common theme came from the many witnesses that told the Committee that they envision a paradigm shift with B.C.'s comprehensive agri-food policy, one that moves away from the conventional farming method towards sustainable agriculture.

Sustainable agriculture means many things to many people, but these witnesses agreed that an agri-food policy based on the principles of sustainability must incorporate the kinds of principles and goals expressed by FarmFolk/CityFolk:

*Our vision is of just and sustainable food systems for B.C. where people can eat local, fresh, seasonal foods grown using farming practices that contribute to the health of people and the planet.*

*Our goals are to:*

1. *ensure that everyone has access to enough and varied food;*
2. *protect and promote our right to know where food comes from, what it contains, and how it is produced;*
3. *promote self-sufficiency by supporting local production of a diversity of foods;*
4. *strive towards food production systems that are economically viable and provide healthy financial returns to farmers;*

5. *promote organic and other methods of food production that foster good human and environmental health;*
6. *emphasize locally controlled farming, food businesses and initiatives;*
7. *ensure our healthy food future by preserving farmland in B.C.;*
8. *work with multicultural communities.*

A related vision is one that emphasizes that food security must include ending hunger and enhancing nutrition. This means facilitating access to nutritious food. In this vision, presenters stressed to the Committee a need to focus on the distribution of adequate amounts of nutritious foods to all members of the community. One presenter called this a "*healthy sustainable food system*", defined as "a food system where the primary goal is to nourish people."

Finally, another group of presenters told the Committee that their vision of an agri-food policy for B.C. is one that emphasizes a commitment to agriculture and food production by all government ministries, policies and programs, as well as local and federal governments. This would include government-wide policies that are evaluated through an agricultural "lens" for their impact on the agricultural sector, and government initiatives wherever possible to educate consumers about the value of agriculture to B.C.



## AGRICULTURAL LAND RESERVE

The Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR), in recognition that B.C.'s limited agricultural lands are continuously threatened by higher-value land uses, protects the most arable lands in B.C. — a total of 5 percent of B.C.'s land mass.

The ALR was established in the early 1970s, after the provincial government, with local governments, agreed that the loss of 6,000 hectares of farm land per year, to residential development, industry and transportation uses, threatened the agricultural productivity of the province. At this time, the boundaries of the ALR were established with reference to the agricultural capability and suitability of the land, already established land uses, established zoning by-laws, and public input.

Over the years, ALR boundaries were revised based on improved soil classification methods and updated maps. The administration of the reserve was also opened up to more cooperation and consultation with local governments and local communities. Now fewer than 500 hectares of arable land are converted to non-agricultural uses every year.

Today the ALR is an important element of the provincial strategy to sustain agriculture in B.C., along with the *Farm Practices Protection (Right to Farm) Act*, the farm tax classification, and the *Growth Strategies Act*. There is widespread support for the ALR's role in supporting the long-term viability of agriculture, food self-sufficiency and the stabilization of agricultural communities. The Land Reserve Commission reports that a 1997 opinion survey found that over 80% of British Columbians consider it to be unacceptable to remove land from the ALR for urban uses.

The submissions received by the Committee also indicate extensive support for the ALR. However, the Committee heard a number of recommendations for modifying the ALR to better serve the agricultural community.

While producers generally support the ALR, some believe that "the four pillars of security" that were established for farmers when the ALR was created — the *Farm Income Insurance Act*, the *Agricultural Land Development Act*, the *Farm Product Industry Act*, and the *Agricultural Credit Act* — should be reinstated. In view of the use restrictions placed on ALR lands, these acts

*Whether farmland is lost to development quickly, with no ALR in place, or gradually, as it is now, the end result is the same. Agricultural land will be wiped out.... The only solution is to quickly come to the point where not one more square inch of farmland is removed from the ALR. If it is not used for farming, then it reverts back to wilderness.*

Allan Patton, Oliver

assured ALR farmers that they would be able to earn a living from farming activities.

Other producers recommended that permitted land uses should be more flexible. For example, regulations allowing farm-related facilities for on-site processing and direct marketing would enable farmers to add value and maximize the earning potential of their basic agricultural production. Adjusting ALR regulations to accommodate regional differences, such as variations in population growth, crop types and compatible land-based industries, would also enable farmers to maximize the benefits of their ALR lands. For example, some witnesses told the Committee that agro-forestry operations would be feasible in the central interior and northern regions of the province.

It was suggested by some that ALR boundaries should be revised using an improved classification system. In addition to intensive soil surveys, the suitability of terrain and physical isolation could be considered. Landowners could also be able to take part in assessing the suitability of their lands for ALR classification.

Submissions to the Committee on the topic of the ALR also exposed a fundamental tension between urban and agricultural values. Much ALR land is located in those parts of the province with the highest urban density: the lower mainland, the Okanagan and the east coast of Vancouver Island.

*As you are developing this agricultural food policy, always keep in mind.... People say that we have to preserve farmland. Who's wet? If you want to preserve it, you buy it.*

Gordie Ivans, Vernon

Urban dwellers appreciate the green space provided by those ALR lands in close proximity to high-density residential areas. Yet for their part, agricultural producers in urbanized areas expressed frustration at the low land values their ALR farms are accorded relative to neighbouring residential properties, especially when producers can't earn a living income from their farms. These producers believe it is unfair for society to restrict the use of arable land to farming if society is unwilling to pay farmers a fair price for their agricultural products. For that reason, some of these presenters recommended that the ALR be revoked.

## AGRICULTURAL LEASES OF CROWN LAND

Leases of Crown land are available in the northern regions of the province through the B.C. Assets and Land Corporation (BCAL). It is estimated that there are currently 250 agricultural leases in the Prince George area, 40 in Smithers and 100 in the Williams Lake area.

In order to remove timber from the leased land, a lessee must obtain a cutting license and pay the stumpage rate assessed by the Ministry of Forests' Forest Service.

Witnesses told the Committee that there are urgent problems with the current agricultural lease policy. Lessees' high stumpage assessments and land clearing costs often exceed what they earn from the sale of logs. The Committee also heard that mills pay a lower price to leaseholders because their priority is logs from their own small business licenses or licenses to cut. As a result, some leaseholders are facing economic hardship as they try to increase their agricultural land base through the agricultural lease program.

Witnesses recommended that stumpage rates be decreased to a rate that enables farmers to develop their land to a productive condition.

They also suggested that agricultural leases and timber removal from leased land be administered by the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries to ensure that the needs of agriculture are given preference over the needs of forestry in the agricultural lease policy.

*We need some serious changes in the system so that we can afford to develop these ag leases and continue the expansion in our area. A lot of people have interest in agricultural leases. Quite a few people have applied for agricultural leases, but currently nobody is doing anything with them, because they can't afford to take the trees off to get at the land to clear it. It costs somewhere in the neighbourhood of \$700 to \$750 an acre to get the land cleared, and it's pretty difficult to come up with that kind of money to develop the land when you're in a negative situation before you even start.*

Wayne Ray, Prince George





## ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP

*Choosing Our Future* asked British Columbians, "Does society have a role to play in assuming all or some of the costs of environmental stewardship on agricultural lands?" A majority of the submissions addressing this topic indicated that, yes, society must take responsibility for the cost of environmental regulations on farm practices. Among these witnesses were represented consumers, business, local government and producers.

In B.C., agricultural producers and processors have demonstrated a commitment to upholding environmental standards in their farm and production practices. For example, since the 1980s, B.C. producers have been North American leaders in Integrated Pest Management (IPM) for the environmentally sound management of agricultural pests and pesticide reduction. IPM prescribes a combination of methods to control plant diseases, insects and weeds to acceptable levels, including the introduction of beneficial insects, changes to plant culture practices, the cultivation of pest resistant plants, and pesticides.

Today almost all of B.C.'s greenhouse producers and tree fruit producers use IPM techniques, as do a majority of vegetable producers. Berry growers are increasingly using IPM to manage berry crop pests. The use of IPM in agriculture resulted in a 50 percent reduction in pesticide use in B.C. agriculture between 1991 and 1995. Further pesticide reductions are likely to occur with recent changes to B.C.'s *Pesticide Control Act* that encourage pesticide users — both in agriculture and forestry — to implement pest management plants that include IPM techniques.

B.C.'s agricultural producers are indeed subject to what seems like an ever-growing list of environmental regulations. Farmers are required, by the following provincial legislation, to responsibly manage fish and wildlife habitats on their farmland:

- *Agricultural Land Commission Act*
- *Drainage, Ditch and Dyke Act*
- *Environmental Management Act*
- *Fisheries Act*
- *Soil Conservation Act*
- *Water Act*
- *Wildlife Act*



In addition, several environmental protection programs have recently been established under the *Right to Farm Act*, including:

- agriculture and aquaculture waste management regulations
- environmental enhancement and sustainable practices programs
- environmental guidelines for farm commodities, developed by the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries and commodity organizations

Although most witnesses agree that farmers should not have to bear the burden of costs associated with environmental regulations, responses indicated a clear philosophical division between those advocating sustainable agriculture and those with a more "mainstream" environmental awareness. These two perspectives aligned with those identified in the witnesses' vision statements. For example, many witnesses suggested that with assistance, conventional agricultural practices could be modified to incorporate environmental improvements. Farmers who adopt environmental protection measures that go beyond the regular "best management practices" could be rewarded with tax incentives or compensation.

These witnesses frequently noted that farmers are, in fact, the original primary stewards of the land and water. They suggest that environmentalism is inherent to good farm practices, since farmers, more than any other group, have an unmediated understanding of their dependence on clean water, soil and air. Therefore, any enhanced environmental standards required by society — for additional wildlife and fish habitat, for protecting plant and animal diversity, or providing urban greenspace — should be paid for by society.

One view that the Committee heard repeatedly from agricultural producers is that drainage ditches are first and foremost farm drains, not potential fish habitat. Therefore, farmers should be compensated for ditch maintenance obligations imposed on them for the purpose of protecting fish.

In contrast, those wanting the norm to shift to sustainable agriculture wrote that the vision of agri-food policy implicit in *Choosing Our Future* is, in essence, an economic-centred one which focuses on the symptoms rather than the causes of the problems facing the agricultural sector. Sustainable agriculture advocates told the Committee that an agri-food policy for B.C. must be comprehensive and based on long-term social, environmental and economic viability. In terms of the environment, this means that B.C.'s agri-food policy should fully account for the environmental costs associated with conventional agriculture, and foster those agriculture practices that are environmentally sustainable — those that enhance biodiversity, soil fertility,

soil conservation, water quality and water conservation — and those forms of agriculture that are environmentally sustainable, such as small-scale production, community self-sufficiency, and organic production.

Some of the various suggestions made by witnesses include:

- in order to make B.C. producers competitive, B.C.'s pesticide, herbicide and fertilizer regulations should be consistent with US rules
- financial incentives and advisory/educational services should be put in place to assist farmers in complying with environmental regulations
- green space tax credits should be considered
- the provision of food should not be "industrialized" as in the term "agri-food industry"
- producers should be provided with research and information, including impact assessments, studies, reports, production processes, and access to researchers, scientists and extension personnel to facilitate informed decision-making
- subsidies that compromise the environment, like transportation subsidies, should be replaced with tax concession to reward local production and distribution systems
- farm scholarships for sustainable agriculture education should be available



## FARM TAX STATUS

*Choosing Our Future* questioned, "How can we restructure the definition of a farm for tax purposes in order to encourage investment without discouraging serious smallholders and new farmers who are just starting out?"

The Committee received numerous replies to this question. Witnesses' recommendations ranged from increasing the farm income threshold for farm tax status, to lowering the threshold, to adjusting the definition of farm land and/or the calculation of the farm income threshold.

Under the current assessment system, there are two components to farm tax status: the farm definition and the earning requirement. First, the farm must meet the criteria of farm land, which is the term used by the B.C. Assessment Authority to identify land that is used to produce a primary agricultural product. Farms between 1.98 and 10 acres that meet the definitional requirement must also earn at least \$2,500 per year from farming activities. Farms larger than 10 acres must earn an additional five percent of the value of the farm land above four hectares, and farms smaller than 1.98 acres must meet an earning requirement of \$10,000 to qualify for farm tax status. Farm residences and buildings are classed as residential properties for B.C. Assessment purposes.

At present there are approximately 59,000 properties in B.C. classed as farm, a figure that has not changed significantly in the past 10 years, even though the income threshold was increased in 1992 from \$1,600 to \$2,500. ALR farm land is not specifically linked with farm tax status. In fact, less than half of the land in the ALR is classed as farm land by B.C. Assessment. About 25 percent farm class land is in municipalities outside of the ALR.

Witnesses clearly identified a problem with the existing process for determining farm tax status. The farm tax income threshold, they claim, encourages "non-productive uses of agricultural land through easily accessed tax advantages." In property classes that are based on market value, the assessment values have increased over time, but the valuation of farm land — based on its agricultural capacity — has not increased with market values. The gap between farm assessment values and market value has therefore widened: non farm property owners see their taxes increasing annually, while farm taxes have changed only when the farm tax rates have changed. It therefore benefits hobby farmers to produce enough farm products to earn the minimum amount necessary to qualify for farm tax status and to pay the lower tax rate.

Witnesses told the Committee that they believe hobby farmers motivated by low farm tax rates are holding good agricultural land without contributing to

the agricultural economy. These witnesses would like the earning threshold raised to prevent hobby farmers from holding good farm land for what is essentially residential use.

Yet genuine smallholders told the Committee that they depend upon the current income threshold level for the viability of their farm operations. New farmers and those producing for smaller niche markets also told Committee members that it is not always easy for them to surpass the yearly \$2,500 income threshold. These witnesses recommended that the farm status calculation be changed without lowering the income threshold, perhaps by changing the definition of farm — if, in fact, hobby farmers must be discouraged.

Other witnesses recommended altogether different criteria for calculating farm tax status. Some suggested a tiered tax rate based on the best use of agricultural land: lower income thresholds for new farmers, higher for hobby farmers, and a higher rate still for producers, like turf grass producers, who remove large amounts of topsoil from agricultural land. Others recommended calculating the value of farm work, input costs and capital costs as indicators of farm activity when establishing the definition of farm land for tax assessment purposes. Other suggestions included giving municipal governments greater authority to distinguish between active and inactive farms, changing the tax status of farm residences and farm buildings, and basing farm income thresholds on longer-term production values.

## **GOVERNMENT INVESTMENT – FARMING “SAFETY NETS”**

Farming is a risky business. Fluctuations in world commodity prices can cause farm profits to waver from year to year, and adverse weather conditions can ruin entire crops. In 1998-1999, the B.C. tree fruit industry experienced both of these. Higher apple production levels from B.C.'s competitors drove prices down, while hot summer weather reduced the quality of B.C.'s tree fruits. As a result, the price apple producers received for their 1998 apple crop was only 10 cents per pound, with production costs of 18 cents per pound.

Currently, B.C.'s agricultural producers are protected from losses through crop insurance, the farm distress operating loan guarantee, Whole-Farm Insurance Program (WFIP), the agricultural income disaster assistance program, and the Net Income Stabilization Account Program (NISA).

The Committee heard producers say that they would like safety net programs enhanced, not the least because B.C. producers receive fewer safety net benefits than producers in neighbouring jurisdictions. Recommendations ranged from making the WFIP a permanent, ongoing program, to reinstating the farm income assurance policy, to improving the terms of the crop insurance program, WFIP and NISA.

Some non-farmers indicated that they do not support government funding for safety net programs because all business owners, including farmers, must anticipate, plan for, and assume the risks that challenge their respective industries. Their views on farming safety nets coincided with their view that fiscal realities require government spending to be reduced in all areas. However, a majority of non-farmers expressed support for existing or higher levels of government support for agriculture.





## URBAN-RURAL INTERFACE

*Choosing Our Future* asked: "How do we establish new links between municipalities, regional districts and the agri-food industry in order to resolve conflicts and build understanding?"

The Committee heard farmers recount their experiences with urban encroachment – from attacks on livestock by domesticated dogs and the destruction of forage crops by trespassers in recreational vehicles, to improper drainage from upland residential developments and residents' intolerance for the noise, odour and other contingencies of farming. With these stories, agricultural producers illustrated the frustration experienced by farming communities in defending their needs against urban values. Those frustrations are exacerbated by the ambiguous support that federal, provincial and municipal regulatory frameworks show for agriculture.

British Columbia's *Farm Practices Protection (Right to Farm) Act* gives farmers in the ALR and in other farming areas the right to carry on normal farm practices. Along with legislating the right to farm, the act attempts to educate residents and local governments and encourages their acceptance of farming activities. Designed to discourage nuisance legal actions, court injunctions or municipal bylaws, the act tries to foster co-operation between local governments and the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries as the interface between farm and residential areas. The act exempts farm practices from some municipal nuisance and other bylaws, while also encouraging the resolution of conflicts at the local government level.

Where community level solutions cannot be found, the act allows residents and farmers to ask the Farm Practices Board to mediate or rule on conflicts about disturbances caused by farm operations. The Farm Practices Board settles such conflicts with reference to the farm practices guidelines and the *Right to Farm Act*.

According to witnesses, the guarantees provided by the *Right to Farm Act* have not yet been realized. Many producers asked that the Committee recommend publicizing and promoting respect for farms and those farm practices protected by the *Right to Farm* legislation. Producers also asked the Committee to recommend that local governments be required to comply with the act's provisions.

The Right to Farm legislation may be heading in the right direction as it encourages local conflict resolution processes. A number of witnesses reported that the Local Agriculture Advisory Committees that have been established in Chilliwack, Delta, Pitt Meadows and Surrey have been effective in fostering cooperation between farmers and residents.





## COMPENSATION FOR WILDLIFE DAMAGE

The B.C. Government must balance a number of diverse land uses. Wildlife requires the same non-urban or isolated lands that are of value in forestry, ranching, farming, recreation, and urban expansion, and its needs are sometimes, but not always compatible with those land uses.

In response to prevailing social values, several B.C. Government policies and programs attempt to achieve a balance between the distinct and sometimes conflicting needs of the above-mentioned land uses and wildlife protection. For example, the Strengthening Farming initiative, the *Farm Practices Protection Act* and the *Land Commission Act* are meant to protect farm land and farm practices from urban encroachment. And the "Protected Areas Strategy" and "Managing Wildlife to 2001" are initiatives to protect wildlife habitat and wildlife diversity in forest, range lands and parks. The *Forest Practices Code* also contains measures to enhance the well-being of wildlife.

Agricultural land use and wildlife can coexist beneficially. Agricultural land is an important source of wildlife habitat, and wildlife can benefit farmers by providing economic activity through tourism, wildlife viewing and hunting access fees. According to the Ministry of Environment, Lands and Parks, in 1996, 29 per cent of the adult population took trips to watch, feed, photograph or study wildlife. These individuals spent an estimated \$392 million on their vacations, or an average of \$450 each, which helped to support jobs in many areas where employment opportunities are scarce.

However, absorbing the costs caused by wildlife damage to crops, facilities and livestock presents an economic burden to farmers already struggling to earn a satisfactory profit from their agricultural operations. In B.C., the Crown is not legally responsible for damage caused by wildlife to domestic animals or property. At present, the B.C. Government has no formal process for recognizing or reimbursing farmers for their costs.

The Provincial Agriculture Wildlife Advisory Committee estimates that \$300,000 of forage crops are lost to wildlife damage annually in the Kootenays and \$200,000 in the Peace River area, and that almost 3 million pounds of blueberries are lost to birds every year.

Witnesses presented many varying opinions on the extent of wildlife damage to crops and the need for compensation measures. A few witnesses described their losses to wildlife damage as minimal. Some farmers told the Committee that seeing wildlife on their lands and providing habitat for them is one of the gratifying benefits of farming.

However, what the Committee heard most on this topic was that farmers cannot afford to absorb the costs of crops lost to wildlife. Farmers in the Cariboo, the Bulkley Valley and the Peace regions told the Committee about the extensive damage caused to their forage crops and stores by elk, deer and bears. Some ranchers are also concerned about wolves preying on their livestock. Fruit producers have difficulty preventing birds from damaging their fruit and berry crops, while lower mainland farmers explained that migratory waterfowl destroy their fields when they use them as wetland habitat.

Witnesses therefore urged the Committee to recommend compensation to farmers for wildlife damage to crop and livestock, or a combination of conservation methods and compensation programs that will both reduce damage and reimburse farmers for damage that does occur.

Other suggestions included allowing the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries to loan temporary fencing to protect hay bales from wildlife, or to share costs with farmers in the building of protective structures for feed stores. It was also recommended that the B.C. government lift the moratorium on the wolf poison, Compound 1080, to assist ranchers in reducing the number of livestock killed or maimed by wolves. And again, enforcement of the *Right to Farm Act* would strengthen producers' right to discourage birds with noisemakers and other deterrents.

## FOOD SECURITY

During the Committee's deliberations, food security emerged as an important, multi-faceted concept. To some witnesses it meant the ability to obtain food in times of crisis, whether it is an earthquake disaster, economic distress or war. It often means having a high degree agricultural self-sufficiency, so that citizens can obtain most of their food from domestic production, as opposed to imported foods.

While a small number expressed the opinion that B.C.'s buying power would mitigate any crisis-induced threats to food security, and others believe that B.C.'s current rate of food production indicates that we have already achieved food security, the Committee heard from many witnesses who have developed the notion of food security into a fundamental social orientation. As expressed by FarmFolk/CityFolk, these witnesses consider food security part of a social and economic milieu in which "everyone has assured access to adequate, appropriate and personally acceptable food in a way that does not damage self-respect; people are able to earn a living wage by growing, producing, processing, handling, retailing and serving food; the quality of land, air and water are maintained and enhanced for future generations; and food is celebrated as central to community and cultural integrity." These witnesses also expressed concern that the consolidation and globalization of food production by agribusiness presents a threat to B.C.'s ability to maintain basic food security.

It is a fact that not everyone in our society has secure or adequate access to food. Food bank use continues to increase, especially among the working poor and those whose income derives from employment insurance, social assistance, old age pension and disability pension benefits. A recent study shows that in Canada, over 95 percent of food bank users obtain food from food banks more than once every six weeks, and almost 25 percent use food banks at least once every three weeks. As food bank use continues to grow, more and more children depend upon food banks for this most basic need.

*Food needs to be distributed equitably throughout the entire community. Although there's enough food in Merritt to feed everyone, not everybody in Merritt has enough food. There is hunger in Merritt largely because a lot of people don't have enough money in order to access food, and they can't produce or gather enough food for themselves to supplement the incomes they have for buying their food.*

*Access to food is not only money but also the knowledge of how to cook food, how to preserve food and how to grow and harvest food. Food has a power, in my mind, to heal, but only if these issues are addressed by the policy that your committee is contributing to creating.*

Jennifer Cody, Kamloops

Where there is an abundance of relatively inexpensive, mass-produced imports in supermarkets and fast-food restaurants, hunger is perceived to be a problem concerning a lack of income. When the view is shifted to community-based agriculture, however, it becomes apparent that hunger is a problem rooted in food distribution systems. Local food production can make nutritious food available to more members of society through community kitchens, gleaning programs, school lunch programs and other initiatives that link local producers with community service providers.

Those witnesses who spoke to the Committee about hunger and nutrition view the social, environmental and economic components of agri-food policy as interdependent. For example, those witnesses advocating a movement to sustainable agriculture for environmental reasons also tend to support the view that food security is a social justice concern. Although they emphasized different points, sustainable agriculture advocates and food security advocates share the following principles:

- food production is the basis of the community economy as it provides for society's most basic need: healthy food
- the production of healthy food requires that land and water resources be protected through sustainable use
- the sustainability of society's agricultural sector depends upon the understanding and support individuals throughout society give to that sector
- the ability for all members of society to access nutritious food is enhanced in a society that values and supports agriculture
- dependence upon external food supplies compromises society's ability to produce food by reducing the economic feasibility of local food production and processing
- long-term dependence will erode the knowledge a society requires to sustain a healthy agricultural economic base

Based on the above principles, witnesses suggested that the Committee recommend cooperation between provincial government ministries, local governments and community organizations in support of community-based agricultural production, processing, distribution and education. It was recommended, for example, that the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries work with the Ministry of Health to incorporate food access and nutrition policies into B.C.'s comprehensive agri-food policy. Witnesses also suggested that government partners find innovative ways to support a wide range of community-delivered food security initiatives, such as a local

distribution system that includes programs like school lunches, community kitchens, food co-ops and farmers markets or an agricultural awareness program that includes community gardens and urban agriculture projects.





## ORGANIC AND NATURAL FOODS

*Choosing Our Future* asked "How can we enhance and build support for B.C.'s expanding organic and natural food sector? Would it be useful to both the industry and the public to develop a labeling system that would identify products that are of high quality and/or low chemical residue — a B.C. "Stamp of Approval"?"

The Committee heard that a large number witnesses from across B.C. support increased organic production and the development of organic value-added products. Witnesses favoured the expansion of the organic agricultural sector both for its environmental benefits and for its great market potential. The domestic and export markets for organic products of all kinds — from fruit, to grain and feed, to eggs and milk — are growing rapidly. In Canada as a whole, the market for organic foods is expected to increase at a rate of more than 15 percent per year. In B.C., 90 percent of organic products sold are imported from other provinces or countries, which suggests that B.C. organic producers also have the potential to increase their share of the provincial organics market.

The number of organic producers in B.C. is growing accordingly. There are approximately 500 organic farms in B.C., and organic-certification bodies throughout B.C. report membership increases every year.

Because organic farming is fundamentally different from conventional large-scale monoculture production, many witnesses urged the Committee to consider shifting policy away from recognizing and assisting only conventional production methods, towards a policy that will also enable small and diversified agricultural operations to flourish. It was suggested in particular that marketing boards and programs like the B.C. Investment Agriculture Foundation adjust their focus in a way that will enable them to understand and respect the characteristics of organic farming.

For the marketing of B.C. agricultural products, some witnesses recommended that B.C. build upon its international reputation as "Super, Natural British Columbia" by promoting its low-pesticide and other environmentally-friendly farming practices when developing external markets.

Some other witnesses believe that creating a "natural" label for some B.C. foods would assist those producers who use environmentally sound practices to sell their products.

However, other witnesses, including the Certified Organic Producers' Association, came out strongly against the proposed "natural" designation or



label. These witnesses told the Committee that a "natural" designation with lower standards than the "organic" designation would serve neither consumers, who would likely believe that "natural" and "organic" are the same, nor organic producers, who would be subject to unfair competition by more cheaply produced "natural" products.

## INNOVATIVE MARKETING AND AGRICULTURAL AWARENESS PROGRAMS

Many witnesses told the Committee that B.C.'s agricultural sector would benefit from innovative marketing schemes and agricultural education for the general population. The Committee heard that British Columbians widely believe that B.C. products are superior in freshness to foods from other jurisdictions and healthier, since they are grown with fewer chemical inputs. Yet witnesses have also identified a gap between that belief and consumers' knowledge of B.C. agriculture and B.C. products. These witnesses believe that the way to maintain the health of the B.C. agriculture sector is by building upon consumers' views of B.C. quality with innovative marketing and educational programs that will ultimately increase B.C. producers' share of the provincial food market.

*If B.C. is going to be a player and if there are going to be niche plays, some of those niches are not just going to be highly successful in the B.C. marketplace but are going to have export potential in the far east and in the United States... So if you specialize in things and B.C. develops a culture of excellence, that attracts people to want to buy B.C.*

Alex D. Campbell, Victoria

The Committee heard testimony from four major grocery retailers and the Canadian Council of Grocery Distributors. The retailers shared their views of the Buy B.C. and B.C. Sharing programs. They also discussed the challenges for local producers who wish to market their products with the large retail grocery chains. The retailers explained that while their stores prefer to support local producers, they are often hard-pressed to find year-round supplier of the full range of products demanded by consumers.

In 1992, the Ministry of Agriculture and Food initiated the BUY B.C. program, whose objective is to assist B.C.'s producers, processors and retailers increase British Columbians' consumption of B.C.-produced foods and beverages. The main components of the program are facilitating B.C. product identification — which is the purpose of the "B.C. Product" label — increasing consumer awareness through activities like British Columbia Food and Beverage Month (September), and building consumer preference for B.C. products by highlighting their superior quality and freshness. The Island Farmers' Alliance has reworked the concept of BUY B.C. into their more localized "Fresh From the Island" marketing campaign. Vancouver Island products are identified with the "Fresh from the Island" rooster logo, which will appear on any products grown, raised, or produced on Vancouver Island farms. The logo will also promote Island products at festivals, special events

and in grocery stores, in an effort to raise the profile of Island agriculture. Similar initiatives are emerging throughout the province.

Agricultural education for school children is at the discretion of teachers. The Agriculture in the Classroom Foundation provides interested schoolteachers with agricultural education materials that they can use to incorporate discussion about B.C. agriculture into their lesson plans.

*Choosing Our Future* posed the question, "Should the government, through its ministries, agencies and Crown corporations, institute a BUY B.C. policy even if that results in higher costs to those institutions?" Numerous witnesses told the Committee that they favour increasing the funding and activities of the BUY B.C. program and expanding the regionalization of the program. A large number of witnesses also agreed that government agencies and institutions should promote BUY B.C. by giving priority to B.C. products when purchasing food supplies, even if there is a slight additional cost.

In addition, many witnesses told the Committee that they would like to see agricultural and nutritional education made a standard part of the B.C. school curriculum, perhaps through the expansion of the existing Agriculture in the Classroom program. These witnesses believe that one of the best ways to support B.C. agriculture is to make urban dwellers aware of how and where their food comes from, which would increase their appreciation for the resource needs of farmers, as well as their appreciation for the value of B.C.-grown food. Educational programs, it was suggested, could include farm tours for both children and adults, agricultural career development programs, and Ag-teams, based on the Ministry of Environment's E-team model, to give youth hands-on farm production experience. Community education, it was recommended, could include public awareness advertising campaigns, community gardens, and agricultural awareness added to the Ministry of Health's healthy foods and healthy lifestyles programs.

## CONCLUSION

The Committee is now focused on reviewing the other matters raised by witnesses. These additional matters may include:

- grazing on Crown range land
- priorities in water use
- water access rights
- drainage access rights
- water exports
- rangeland fencing
- noxious weed control
- aquaculture
- dairy industry
- food processing industry
- sheep industry
- tree fruit industry
- transportation needs
- small-scale agriculture
- employment standards
- human resource skills
- transient worker accommodation
- farm organizations
- access to venture capital
- marketing boards
- Ministry of Agriculture budget
- extension services
- agricultural research
- additional taxation issues
- international trade agreements
- local control of the food system
- equality of access to good food
- farmers' markets
- the B.C. Sharing program
- genetically modified foods
- use of agro-chemicals
- food inspection and regulation

With reference to their contributions, Committee members will develop a vision and a set of recommendations that can guide the development of B.C.'s agriculture and food sector in the first decades of the new millennium.

Inspired by what they heard from hundreds of British Columbians the Committee's final report will reaffirm the importance of the agri-food industry for the provincial economy and for rural communities in all regions of B.C. and propose policy changes to ensure its future viability.